

MISCELLANEA

NOTES ON THE KANDAHAR EDICT OF ASOKA

The publication of a bilingual Greek-Aramaic inscription of Asoka from Shar-i-Kuna near Kandahar in Afghanistan* may add a degree of certainty to what have been reasonable conjectures. The editors have done their work so well that one need comment only upon certain implications which did not concern or interest them.

1. G. L. Della Vida notes on p. 29 of the brochure, that the Aramaic is not a translation of the Greek, but that both derive from a common source, presumably the (Māgadhi) rescript sent out by Asoka's chancellery. Actually, we may see more than that. The edict was composed specially for the frontier region; its precise counterpart is found nowhere else. Asoka knew (as his other edicts state) that the various Indian sects, the brahmins, and the *śramaṇa* ascetics did not exist in Yoṇa. Pāli canonical literature shows awareness of the fact that Yoṇa-Kamboja and other countries beyond the frontier had not four castes but only two: "free" and "slave", which were not immutable. The emphasis in this edict is upon non-killing, attentiveness (*śūsṛūṣā*) to the needs of parents and elders, and perhaps upon *dhamma* – a term difficult to explain even now. In the Greek, this is rendered *eusebeia*, though Menander would later describe himself as *dhammaka* = *dikaïos*. The Aramaic, developed as a *koinē* under the Persian empire, uses perhaps *qšt mḥqšt*, or *ptytw*, the exact equivalent being still in doubt.

The question could have been of no great importance for Asoka's secretariat, for rather peculiar reasons. The *Arthaśāstra* type of administration which was now being abandoned even for the Magadhan heartland had never prevailed in Afghanistan. In the *Arthaśāstra*, *dhamma* is used generally in the sense of the 'innate natural law' for each group of men, whether tribe, caste, or guild. The secondary meaning 'religion' does not conflict with this, for every such group had its own particular religion, consisting of special rites and observances. The difficulty arose only when these diverse groups had to function together as a society without conflict. It was at this stage that the need for a *dhamma* in some broader sense became necessary. Buddhism was one of the answers to this social demand for cohesion just as the Magadhan 'universal monarchy' was another. Asoka's *dhamma* is therefore not to be understood as Buddhism, but as some code of behaviour for all society which could be followed without damage to the various older group-*dhammas*.

* *Un editto bilingue greco-aramaico di Asoka; la prima iscrizione greca scoperta in Afghanistan*. Edited with translation and notes by G. Pugliese Carratelli (Greek) and G. Levi Della Vida (Aramaic), with a preface by G. Tucci, and introduction by U. Scerrato. The reader should excuse my using chapter 7 of my own *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay 1956) without further reference, for the background.

Asoka's *dharmā-yātā* of the eighth rock edict (*RE*) could not have been just a pilgrimage, nor even one combined with a tour of good works and proselytising for Buddhism—as so many (including the late Jules Bloch) would have it. However, it was obviously and consciously in striking contrast to the traditional royal progress through the dominions, the former *vihāra-yātā* for eating up local surplus which combined inspection with pleasant diversions such as hunting. The definitive words of *RE* 8 are *janapadasa jānasa dasane dhammānu-satthi ca dharmā-palipucchā ca*: 'inspection of tribal districts, of the tribes, and inquiry into (their local) *dharmā* and adjustment of that *dharmā*'. The usual translation removes *janapada* and *jana* from the context, which carried the residue into: 'instruction and examination in morality'. Similarly, the *dharmā-mahāmātā* proclaimed as a radical innovation in *RE* 5 were officials (appointed also over Kandahar, as we are told) endowed with ample funds and full powers even to commute death sentences. One of their principal duties was to see that the subordinate *dharmā-yutas* were unhampered in their work. If this task had primarily been that of reconciling theological differences in the modern sense, the powers are surely excessive for the time and the country. The casual rendering of *dharmā* at Shar-i-Kuna would then be inexplicable, and the Afghan edict rather trivial for publication at an important junction of trade routes. If, however, these new special administrators were empowered and directed to readjust the innumerable group *dhammas* to the needs of society as a whole in order to reduce the state's drastic use of force and punishment in the *Arthasāstra's* system of administration, the edicts become quite logical, and impart fundamental new information to the present-day reader just as they proclaimed new rights in their own period.

2. If the Kandahar inscription was originally dictated in Māgadhi, translated independently into Greek and Aramaic, and finally inscribed in these two languages with their particular alphabets, why has this not happened elsewhere so far as can be discovered? None of the proper Indian edicts of Asoka is in any local Indian language; the alphabet is Brāhmī or Kharoṣṭhī. It seems reasonably clear from this that throughout the length and breadth of India proper (or at least that portion which lay within the Asokan sphere of influence) there did not exist any script other than Brāhmī or any language other than Māgadhi which could be understood by a considerable number of the people or be regarded in any district as a *lingua franca*. This is particularly surprising in a place like Kalinga where the devastating Asokan campaign affected several hundreds of thousands of people. The Kalinga population was thereafter under Asoka's special care. It is difficult to imagine that they spoke the same language as that of Uttar Pradesh in the third century B.C. Nevertheless, Asoka addresses them (and admonishes his officials to treat them with special care) solely in the Magadhan speech. The explanation can only be that Kalinga had far too many tribal languages of its own for any one to be chosen over the other, and that none of them were at that time literate. A similar situation is to be discerned today in any tribal area in Assam, which still has some 175 languages and where

even large tribes like the Garos and the Nāgas speak strongly variant dialects among themselves. Similar reports were given of the South Sea Islands in older days, to the effect that a language could be found at times confined to a unit as small as a single village.

If this be admitted of Kaliṅga, it must have been true of less populated regions such as Mysore. The traders who penetrated the south had introduced for the first time something like a common language which could be understood at least along their trade-routes. Most of the actual dissemination must be credited to the Buddhist monks who preached the Law along the same tracks. The tremendous Deccan cave monasteries give impressive proof of the closest cooperation between missionary and caravan merchant, originally both Magadhan. Certain colonies of northerners in the south must also be taken into account. The Jain *ācārya* Bhadrabāhu's migration still needs to be attested by archaeological work, but is historical without any doubt.

My contention is supported by various local inscriptions just after Asoka. The Sātavāhanas used not only the Brāhmī script but also the Māgadhi language in their epigraphs. Nahapāna and Uṣavadāta were themselves Śakas, but their inscriptions like those of Khāravela are also in the same script and language. Clearly, these kings of such varied ethnic origin boasted of their exploits in a language which had the best chance of being understood by the maximum number of literate people of their day. Yet languages not derivable from the Indo-Aryan stock are now current over a considerable part of these ancient kingdoms, particularly in those portions that did not lie on the most used trade routes from Magadha. The separate development of Kanarese and Telugu as against Marāṭhi and Oriya indicates precisely the slow emergence of later provincial common markets.

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DESIDERATA IN INDIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: AN ESSAY

In historical writing on India a critical point has been reached. This seemed very clear at the London Conference on Historical Writing on the Peoples of Asia in July 1956: old authorities were discredited and jettisoned, the martyrs who had suffered for holding dissenting or even merely neutral views were canonized, famous textbooks were found to require expurgating before being reprinted.

In India itself, a comprehensive work¹⁾ on a scale more suited to its content

1) *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1951 in progress. The fact that despite its scale the work still appears scrappy, a mere framework, shows us how far we are from a historiography commensurate with the history of India. Monographs on particular dynasties or periods show that the materials would permit a far fuller treatment of a great part of the history, and that many empty phrases could be replaced by full ones.